News and notes

The major theme of this number of *Australasian Parliamentary Review* is parliamentary committees. As the various articles show, committees in many Australasian parliaments are very active, and have a diversity of issues to tackle in holding governments to account and scrutinising administration. Age-old tussles between the executive and legislative branches of government are today as likely to be fought out in committees as in the plenary sessions of the various houses of parliament. Because ministers are only occasionally present in such forums, the parliamentarians have a decided advantage over the spokespeople for executive government who essentially may only speak as and when spoken to. More on this aspect later.

Curiously, media interest in parliament, though declining, still focuses on parliaments in plenary session, especially Question Time jousts. Plenary sessions in most chambers are largely barren affairs. Committees, on the other hand, offer more in the way of good copy, even beyond periodical disclosures of wasteful expenditure. Party lines are less rigidly drawn and there is more scope for discussion, debate and repartee. Even so, some observers look nostalgically back several decades to an era when partisanship was even less in evidence. It was generally an era, however, when committees mainly examined matters decidedly marginal in policy terms. Now they are much more conspicuously active on significant matters. Greater relevance, perhaps inevitably, brings greater partisanship.

One of the great ironies of increasing use of committees is the way in which they reverse the traditional relationship between ministers and officials. When a house is in plenary session it is the minister who must speak for officials, even on occasion defend them. In a committee setting ministers are frequently not even present. Even when they are, they are often silent. It frequently falls to officials to speak and, in effect, defend the minister or the minister's policy. Especially because of appearances by officials before committees, traditional public service anonymity has certainly passed into history.

Despite the rising significance of committees, parliaments themselves have been relatively inactive in promoting the committee work of their members. Inquiries are usually advertised in a highly formal and often forbidding manner, usually with instructions to keep submissions secret until released by the committee. The

initiative in moving to a friendlier, more inclusive approach may be found in the House of Representatives' periodical advertisements in *The Australian*. These are a substantial improvement which could well be emulated more widely.

In the case of Parliament House, Canberra, publicity about committee hearings is limited, and access a challenge for all but the most determined. This is so, surprisingly, even when committees are sitting at times when the houses are not. It is not unusual for members of the public visiting on non-sitting days to be completely oblivious of a range of committee proceedings under way behind various closed doors. Should they succeed, against the odds, in penetrating these barriers they are as likely to be greeted with an unwelcoming speech from a committee chair about what they may not do, ameliorated only in some small measure by advice that continuous tea and coffee is available nearby. Committee rooms themselves are designed so that the visiting public see only the backs of witnesses; when they were designed little if any thought was given to the public who might be interested in following proceedings.

The basic problem is that most parliamentary buildings assume that the chambers are the main places of action and that committee proceedings are private (as they frequently were, historically). Both assumptions are dated, if in different degrees. There are various improvements which might readily be made. Newspapers could be encouraged to publish information about parliamentary activities (chamber and committee) each day in form comparable to the 'Law Notices'. Foyers of parliament houses could have prominently placed notice boards with information on the day's parliamentary proceedings, especially committees. And some consideration should be given to a more inclusive layout for the venues of committee proceedings.

The various articles included in this number of *APR* derive from ASPG's lively conference in Brisbane in July 2000, ably organised by Professor Paul Reynolds and the Queensland chapter. The articles as a group are wide-ranging. They cover committee structures, styles of operation, powers, the appropriateness of certain roles and the constant battle to defeat bureaucracy.

Even so, many aspects of committee operations and their contributions to governance and administration are not addressed, not least for want of time and space. These aspects include choice of topics for review and investigation, the handling of submissions, the use of research, the availability and provision of expert advice, methods of reporting, the contributions of parliamentary libraries and research services to committee work, and the old but still relevant question of what happens once reports are presented. On the latter matter, committees on major subjects could help themselves to some extent by conducting follow-up hearings.

Committees are thus likely to be a much-visited parliamentary activity in the conferences of the ASPG and in the pages of *APR*. This is highly appropriate given that they play so important a role in the life of a modern parliament in its legislative as well as its accountability and scrutiny work.

Launch of *Australasian Parliamentary Review*

A major feature of ASPG's program in 2001 was the re-launch of its twice-yearly periodical under the new title, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*. This important event was marked by Professor Robert Hazell's visit to Australia and his lecture, in Canberra, Sydney and Wellington, on the range of developments in British government since the Blair Labour Government took office in 1997. The text is published in this number (pp. 5–26).

His visit to Canberra coincided with centenary celebrations of Australia's first national elections in March 1901. The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives hosted a function at Parliament House to mark those important first elections — the first time in the world that two houses of a parliament were elected on the basis of adult suffrage (with women also voting in a number of states). On that occasion the inaugural number of *APR* was launched.

Curiously this was one of the few events marking the first elections for the Commonwealth Parliament. Nearly all the effort went into celebrations associated with the centenary of the Parliament's first meetings in May 1901.

Parliaments Abroad

Scotland's restored national parliament is a popular destination for visitors to Edinburgh today. Its permanent building at the foot of the Royal Mile near Holyroodhouse Palace is now under construction. Its construction is attended by, it seems, the usual story of such buildings — the cost already exceeds estimates and it is unlikely that the new building will not be able to accommodate everyone involved in the Parliament's operations.

The Parliament itself meets in the Assembly rooms of the Church of Scotland and follows the amphitheatre layout style of continental parliaments rather than the rectangular, government–opposition layout of a traditional Westminster parliament. Question Time is a demure affair in comparison with those found in many Australian parliaments, though New Zealanders may not notice so strong a contrast with comparable proceedings in their House of Representatives. Questions themselves are relatively short and the objective seems to be information about policy or, even, sometimes, a simple matter of information. Answers likewise are brief and relevant, two classic parliamentary skills apparently beyond the reach of many Australians who reach ministerial office. Supplementaries are allowed and usual. Proceedings are benignly presided over by Westminster veteran and former Liberal leader, Sir David Steel, in a parliament where Labour is in government and the Scottish National Party is the major non-government party.

Also on the Royal Mile is an information centre about the parliament and Scotland's new governmental arrangements under devolution. This is a high quality, very informative presentation.

Long queues outside the Reichstag building in Berlin may easily be taken to suggest a strong interest in the proceedings of the Bundestag. Unfortunately the crowds are mainly there to ascend to the roof for a truly panoramic view of the city.

Like some other new parliamentary buildings, the rebuilding of the Reichstag seems to have been guided by abstract architectural values rather than parliamentary purposes. The Bundestag chamber is very large and, inevitably, in the continental style. Even with more than a hundred members present it still seems relatively empty. And speakers inevitably seem to have to shout when at the podium. Party rooms are likewise huge.

The Bundesrat, on the other hand, has all the advantages of intimacy. Although often seen more as an inter-governmental council, it in fact has many hallmarks of a conventional house of parliament. One important reason for this is the presence (at the Bundesrat's request) of around a third of the ministers in the government. Housed some distance away from the Reichstag in a graceful nineteenth century building it undertakes not only a thorough scrutiny of federal legislation but also the masses of legal instruments promulgated in Brussels. In its modern form the Bundesrat is a post-Second World War creation and takes its lineage not so much from the parliamentary institutions of the Federal German Empire as from the old upper house of the Kingdom of Prussia.

Clearly no nominal parliamentary body, it is conspicuously federal in character in a way that the Australian Senate under its present voting system can never be (except in the equal representation sense).

The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September meant proceedings of the House of Commons on 14 September 2001 were televised. What was effectively a ministerial statement by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was followed by statements by Ian Duncan Smith on his first parliamentary outing as Leader of the Opposition and other party leaders. Then followed questions to the prime minister; some of the more conspicuous questioners were critics of the prime minister in his own party. In giving the call the Speaker appeared to be guided by the objective of allowing articulation of all the main strands of opinion, including (perhaps especially) minority opinions in the governing party. Events of this character mean that political debate occurs in a parliamentary context as well as on the current affairs shows on television. ▲